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Solidarity Thrives Underground

Twice in recent months I've tried to get into Poland, but the country's communist military dictatorship wouldn't grant me a visa.

The Polish authorities didn't want me to meet Lech Walesa, the dynamic leader of the outlawed Solidarity union.

The Polish government partially relented, however, and let my associate Lucette Lagnado travel freely through the country. Here is what she found:

Even before arrival in Poland, a visitor is surprised to hear outspoken criticism of the communist regime from Poles flying home. These were Polish citizens who were among the most privileged and presumably trusted by the regime, having been allowed to leave the country. They made their remarks within earshot of other passengers who must have included secret police. One man, who told of involvement in the printing of illegal newspapers, was a factory manager.

The returning Poles agreed that Solidarity is alive and well, though forced underground. The murder of the Rev. Jerzy Popieluszko by police agents invigorated the illegal movement, they said.

The complaints continued whenever Poles heard my associate speaking English. A young father told of low wages and generally difficult economic conditions. Employees of Inter-press, the liaison office between visiting journalists and government officials, complained of difficulties with the Polish bureaucracy.

President Reagan is apparently as popular among Poles as he is among Americans. Several Poles said they had prayed for his reelection. They expressed

hope that Reagan would keep up the embargoes that add to their misery. A surprising number of Poles spoke of Yalta as if it had occurred yesterday instead of 40 years ago; they view it bitterly as the root of all their postwar troubles, a sellout of the Poles by their Western allies.

Confirming the scarcity of consumer goods was no problem. The only well-stocked stores are the Pevex outlets that accept only hard currency. They offer beautiful sheepskin coats, choice liquors and French perfume. The stores that accept Polish currency have little to sell but shoddy goods. Meat is rationed and buying it requires standing in line for hours. Yet in the tourist hotels, fine cuts of meat are on the menu.

Intelligence sources blame Poland's economic crisis not just on mismanagement by the communist regime but on the refusal of the labor force to work as a result of the harsh crackdown on their union.

One Pole, who claimed to be a Communist Party member, confirmed at least the part about the workers' lack of motivation to produce. He hinted that the inefficiency of Polish industry was partly the government's fault. "Our factories cannot compete with yours," he said. "They are backward."

Despite the threat of official crackdown, Poles remain candid in their criticism of the regime. As one man put it with a mixture of defiance and resignation: "I know I can be put in prison for what I say. But so what?"

The Warsaw church where Popieluszko preached has become a shrine visited by hundreds of pilgrims daily. Incense burns at his grave, and Solidarity symbols cover the church fence.